

# Atlas Flycatcher *Ficedula speculigera* or Collared Flycatcher *F. albicollis* in Mauritania?

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Gobemouche de l'Atlas *Ficedula speculigera* ou Gobemouche à collier *F. albicollis* en Mauritanie? Un gobemouche énigmatique du genre *Ficedula*, capturé au filet japonais et photographié à Tichît, Mauritanie, le 17 septembre 2004, est décrit et son identification discutée. Bien qu'il ait été initialement considéré être un Gobemouche de l'Atlas *F. speculigera*, plusieurs caractéristiques typiques de cette espèce ne semblent pas correspondre. La possibilité qu'il s'agisse d'un Gobemouche à collier *F. albicollis* de première année, d'un hybride Gobemouche à collier × Gobemouche noir *F. hypoleuca* ou d'un Gobemouche de l'Atlas est examinée. Il est recommandé de faire extrêmement attention quand il s'agit d'identifier des gobemouches *Ficedula* noir-et-blanc en Afrique de l'Ouest, les connaissances des divers plumages de ces oiseaux n'étant toujours pas complètes.

**Summary.** An enigmatic *Ficedula* flycatcher, mist-netted and photographed in Tichît, Mauritania, on 17 September 2004, is described and its identification discussed. Although initially thought to be an Atlas Flycatcher *F. speculigera*, several features typical of the latter were apparently absent in the Mauritanian bird. The possibilities of the bird being a first-year Collared Flycatcher *F. albicollis*, a hybrid Collared × Pied Flycatcher *F. hypoleuca* or an Atlas Flycatcher are examined. It is recommended that extreme care be shown when attempting to identify black-and-white *Ficedula* flycatchers in West Africa, as current knowledge of the various plumages of these birds is still inadequate.

Three species of black-and-white flycatchers of the genus *Ficedula* occur in Europe, all of which are long-distance migrants wintering in different regions of sub-Saharan Africa (Cramp & Perrins 1993, Urban *et al.* 1997). Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* is a common winter visitor to many West African countries (Dowsett 1993a, Urban *et al.* 1997); Collared Flycatcher *F. albicollis* and Semi-collared Flycatcher *F. semitorquata* winter in central and eastern Africa (Urban *et al.* 1997). In West Africa, Collared Flycatcher is a rare to scarce passage migrant with the westernmost records from Niger and northern Nigeria (Giraudoux *et al.* 1988, Elgood *et al.* 1994). Previous claims from Mauritania, Senegal, Mali and Ghana are all unsubstantiated or erroneous (Urban *et al.* 1997, Borrow & Demey 2001). There are no certain records of Semi-collared Flycatcher (Urban *et al.* 1997, Borrow & Demey 2001). A fourth species of black-and-white *Ficedula*, Atlas Flycatcher *F. speculigera* was recently split from Pied Flycatcher based on differences in mitochondrial DNA (Sætre *et al.* 2001, Sangster *et al.* 2004). The breeding population of

Semi-collared Flycatcher tentatively reported from Algeria (Moali *et al.* 1991) was rejected by Svensson & Mild (1992), who suggested that this population consisted of either Atlas Flycatchers or hybrid Atlas × Collared Flycatchers.

Atlas Flycatcher has a relatively small breeding range in the Atlas Mountains, from Morocco to Tunisia (Lundberg & Alatalo 1992, Urban *et al.* 1997). Few details concerning its migrations are known (Isenmann & Moali 2000, Thévenot *et al.* 2003). On presumed migration and on the wintering grounds, there are records from Senegal (mist-netted: Morel & Morel 1990) and Côte d'Ivoire (collected: Thiollay 1985; but specimen now lost: J.-M. Thiollay pers. comm.). There are no records from Mauritania, where the only black-and-white flycatcher is Pied Flycatcher (Lamarche 1988, Dowsett 1993b, Roth 2004).

During field work in Mauritania, 511 *Ficedula* flycatchers were ringed at various sites between spring 2003 and spring 2004. Of these, 510 were assigned to Pied Flycatcher; the other bird, mist-netted on 17 September 2004 in Tichît (18°26'N 09°30'W), was definitely not a Pied because of the



Figure 1. *Ficedula* sp., Tichît, Mauritania, 17 September 2004. The large white spots on the median and primary-coverts and the large white wing-patch formed by the white bases to the primaries exclude Pied Flycatcher *F. hypoleuca*, but are characteristic of Collared Flycatcher *F. albicollis* and Atlas Flycatcher *F. speculigera*. The pattern of the white edge of the tertial indicates a first-year (V. Salewski)

*Ficedula* sp., Tichît, Mauritanie, 17 septembre 2004. Les grandes taches blanches sur les couvertures moyennes et primaires et la grande tache alaire blanche formée par la base des rémiges primaires excluent le Gobemouche noir *F. hypoleuca*, mais sont caractéristiques du Gobemouche à collier *F. albicollis* et du Gobemouche de l'Atlas *F. speculigera*. Le pattern des lisérés blancs des rémiges tertiaires indique qu'il s'agit d'un oiseau de première année (V. Salewski)

Figure 2. *Ficedula* sp., Tichît, Mauritania, 17 September 2004. The uniform brown mantle contrasts with the darker wings and tail. The rump-feathers have distinct whitish tips, but no anchor-like pattern; this pattern is not clearly developed on the neck-feathers either (V. Salewski)

*Ficedula* sp., Tichît, Mauritanie, 17 septembre 2004. Le manteau uniformément brun contraste avec les ailes et la queue plus sombres. Les plumes du croupion ont le bout distinctement blanchâtre, mais pas de pattern en forme d'ancrage; ce pattern n'est pas non plus développé clairement sur les plumes de la nuque (V. Salewski)

Captions to Figs. 3 and 4 on opposite page.

large white spots on the median coverts and rump, and the large white wing-patch formed by the white bases to the primaries (Figs. 1–2).

Black-and-white *Ficedula*, especially first-winters and non-breeding adults, are notoriously difficult to identify, even in the hand (Mild 1994b). The distinct step-like extension of the white fringe to the outer web of the central tertial indicates that the bird from Tichît was a first-year (Fig. 2), whilst the dark uppertail-coverts and rectrices and colour pattern of the tail-feathers (Fig. 3) were adult male-like (Mild 1994b). Its body mass was 11.4 g. Wing-length was 80 mm and length of p3 (numbered ascendantly, as in Mild 1994b) was 62 mm. The wingtip was formed by pp3–4. The tip of p2 fell between pp5 and 6 (Fig. 3). Throat and upper breast were buffish, with the rest of the underparts becoming gradually more whitish posteriorly. The mantle was uniform brown, contrasting with the darker wings and tail. The rump-feathers had distinct whitish tips (Fig. 2). The rectrices (Fig. 3) were dark

brown to blackish. The three outermost tail-feathers had white fringes, which did not extend onto the inner web and were clearly separated from the dark feather tips, not gradually merging into the darker areas. On the third outermost rectrix the white area was highly restricted to the fringe of the outer web. The greater and median wing-coverts had large whitish tips; pp3–10 had large white bases on the outer webs, forming a white wing-patch (Fig. 4).

Apart from Pied Flycatcher, including its Iberian subspecies *F. h. iberiae*, which was excluded already, any of the other three *Ficedula* is possible. Most adult Semi-collared Flycatchers have at least some white-tipped median coverts, but these are also found in many first-years of all species. Therefore, the white-tipped median coverts are not indicative of Semi-collared Flycatcher as they are insufficiently large to exclude Collared Flycatcher (Mild 1994b). Although most first-year male Collared Flycatchers have a female-like overall colour pattern, some have black rectrices and remiges as Semi-collared (Mild 1994b); again, Collared Flycatcher cannot be excluded based on this character. The length of the white primary patch in relation to the longest primary-covert was not measured, but the photograph showing the 5.1 mm-wide aluminium ring on the bird's leg (Fig. 1) suggests that it is larger than the maximum 3 mm for Semi-collared Flycatcher (Mild 1994b: Table 4) and therefore points to Collared Flycatcher. Furthermore, according to Mild (1994b: Table 3), the white patches at the bases of the primaries' outer webs start at p3 in 16% of first-year male Collared Flycatchers ( $n=137$ ), as in the Mauritanian bird, but never on p3 in first-year male Semi-collared Flycatchers ( $n=27$ ). However, the tip of p2 falls between pp5 and 6 in only 3% of Collared Flycatchers ( $n=114$ ), but in 15% of Semi-collared Flycatchers ( $n=160$ ) and in 74% of Pied Flycatchers ( $n=185$ ; Mild 1994b: Table 1). The colour pattern of the tail also most likely excludes Semi-collared and normal Collared Flycatchers (Svensson 1992, Mild 1994a,b). However, the colour pattern of the Mauritanian bird's tail (large white areas on the outer web of the two outermost rectrices, a restricted white area on the third outermost rectrix and no white on the inner webs) is not described for adult or first-year male *Ficedula* flycatchers by Mild (1994a,b). The

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#### Captions to figures on opposite page

**Figure 3.** *Ficedula* sp., Tichit, Mauritanie, 17 September 2004. The three outermost rectrices have white fringes that do not extend onto the inner web. The white area on the third outermost rectrix is restricted to the fringe of the outer web. The tip of p2 falls between p5 and p6 (V. Salewski)

*Ficedula* sp., Tichît, Mauritanie, 17 septembre 2004. Les trois rectrices externes ont des lisérés blancs qui ne s'étendent pas sur la vexille interne. La zone blanche sur la troisième rectrice externe est confinée au liséré de la vexille externe. Le bout de p2 tombe entre p5 et p6 (V. Salewski)

**Figure 4.** *Ficedula* sp., Tichît, Mauritanie, 17 September 2004. The greater and median wing-coverts have large whitish tips, which is typical of adult Collared Flycatchers *F. albicollis*, but these are also frequently present on first-years of other *Ficedula*. Pp3–10 have large white bases to the outer webs characteristic of Collared Flycatcher and Atlas Flycatcher *F. speculigera* (V. Salewski)

*Ficedula* sp., Tichît, Mauritanie, 17 septembre 2004. Les grandes couvertures alaires et les couvertures moyennes ont des larges bouts blancs, typiques de Gobemouche à colliers *F. albicollis* adultes, mais ceux-ci sont aussi fréquemment présents sur des individus de première année d'autres gobemouche du genre *Ficedula*. Les rémiges p3–10 ont de larges bases blanches aux vexilles externes, caractéristiques du Gobemouche à collier et du Gobemouche de l'Atlas *F. speculigera* (V. Salewski)

pattern of the nape and rump-feathers is a further important character to distinguish *Ficedula* flycatchers (Svensson 1992, Mild 1994b). The bird from Tichît (Fig. 2) lacked the anchor-shaped white pattern on these feathers characteristic of Collared Flycatcher. Absence of this pattern could suggest either Semi-collared or Pied Flycatcher (Mild 1994b), but such a pattern is also difficult to see in specimens of first-year Collared Flycatchers held in the Naturhistorisches Museum Basel (pers. obs.).

In fact, there are characters in the Tichît bird which exclude all three discussed species. The large white patch at the base of the primaries definitely excludes Pied Flycatcher, although patterns on the rectrices, neck and rump-feathers and position of the tip of p2 may suggest this species. Semi-collared Flycatcher is excluded by the position at which the white bases of the outer webs of the primaries start, and by the tail pattern, though it cannot be excluded by the colour pattern of the neck and rump-feathers. According to the shape and position of the white patches at the bases of the primaries, the bird might be a Collared Flycatcher, but this unlikely, because of the position of the tip of p2 and the tail pattern. Most of these characters are, however, very variable within a species (Mild 1994a,b) and an odd pattern may always occur, along with the possibility of hybrids between Pied and Collared Flycatchers (Svensson & Mild 1992).

Atlas Flycatcher has not been discussed thus far and the problem is that there are hardly any descriptions available in the literature, especially of first-years. Hartert (1910) described some characters of Atlas Flycatcher also found in the Mauritanian bird, e.g. that the white bases of the primaries occur occasionally from p3 (usually from p4) and that p5 is distinctly longer than p2, but also that the rectrices are mostly all black and that the outermost tail-feathers only rarely have white to a large extent on the outer web. It is, however, not indicated whether these characters have a general value or are only found in certain age or sex classes. Curio (1960) investigated six adult males in breeding plumage. In three the white bases of the primaries started on p3, p2 was always shorter than p5, but again only one had some white on the rectrices (on three feathers on the right side and two feathers on the left side). Svensson (1992) emphasises the similarity of some

characters of Atlas and Collared Flycatchers, namely, again, that the white primary patch can start on p3 and that the white patch formed by the white bases of the primaries can reach 4–9 mm beyond the longest primary-coverts in adult males, but also that p2 apparently always falls between p5 and p6 in Atlas Flycatcher. Furthermore, characters which are mentioned as similar to Collared Flycatcher are the all-black tail in adult males and the darker upperparts and wing-feathers of Atlas Flycatcher compared to Pied Flycatcher, but no characters of first-years are mentioned.

From the above, the bird from Tichît could be an Atlas Flycatcher. The colour pattern of the rectrices is a questionable character, but this has not been described for first-year Atlas Flycatcher yet, and the variability of this character is unknown. Another feature not described for first-year *Ficedula* flycatchers by Mild (1994b) and not visible in any of the photographs he presents (e.g. Plates 9, 11 and 14) is the distinct white tips to the rump-feathers of the bird from Tichît, although adult male Collared Flycatchers can have white feathers in the rump.

Apart from the description, there is circumstantial evidence that the bird could be an Atlas Flycatcher, aside of being an atypical vagrant Collared Flycatcher or a hybrid Pied × Collared Flycatcher. Although Atlas Flycatchers are scarce breeders in Morocco, they are locally common in the Western Middle Atlas (Thévenot *et al.* 2003). They are thought to migrate across the Sahara and thus pass through Mauritania. The Tichît bird would be the first record of the species for the country, but this is probably due to identification problems. This may also hold true for all of West Africa with respect to potential migration routes and wintering grounds of Atlas Flycatcher, which remain unknown. More data are needed to separate Atlas from Collared Flycatcher, both in the field and in the hand, and to identify hybrids e.g. between Pied and Collared Flycatchers, a possibility which also cannot be eliminated for the bird from Tichît.

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